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Stranglehold

PHIL McCOMBS,
a reporter for the
Style section of
The Post, was
chief of The Post's
Saigon bureau in
April 1975.

SAIAGON: On the last day I was there, April 29, 1975, the North Vietnamese Army shelled Tansonnhut airport before dawn. Hit it with 300 rounds from 130 mm guns located miles away and ripped up the runway so that the American evacuation that began later in the day had to be by chopper. During the shelling the whole city shook and reporters went to the roof of the old Continental Palace Hotel to watch. They saw great billowing fireballs and one said he saw a Strela heat-seeking missile shoot up and disintegrate an airplane. I slept through the whole thing.

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EXCERPTED

At dusk on the 29th, as frantic Vietnamese clawed at the embassy gates, Greenway said quietly, "It's time to go." It had never occurred to me to hang around for the "liberation" and anyway Bradlee had ordered us out. Oberdorfer had gone out a few days earlier to report from the American evacuation fleet off the coast in the South China Sea. Staying alive in Vietnam had always been a matter of playing the odds, and if Greenway, whose instincts were perfectly pitched, said it was time to go, then it was. The big Marine choppers landing in the embassy parking lot seemed few and far between, the crowds outside the gates were growing uglier and night was falling. CIA station chief Tom Polgar was wondering aloud why the North Vietnamese hadn't turned their 130 mm guns on the embassy.

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EXCERPTED

... The agonized realization has dawned on my friend that in a short time, possibly in weeks, the Vietcong flag

may be flying over Saigon." I remember how we were alone in my apartment with the sun streaming in, how he said maybe he would get a small boat and how the thought made him break down—his precious wife and children adrift on the sea! Later this man and his family got out on the secret airlift and now live in Washington.

Saigon's collapse seemed inevitable by April 2. The government had only seven divisions left and 19 NVA divisions—a quarter of a million well-armed troops—were rolling south. Gen. Frederick C. Weyand visited Saigon to report to President Ford and he brought along a top CIA guy who told a wonderful story at dinner: Back in the '50s he had been the Saigon station chief and one night he and some friends went tiger hunting out near Tayninh. As they walked under the moon near a dark and crumbling villa, they were suddenly transfixed by a spotlight from its balcony. It was the Vietminh and this CIA guy remembered in that instant thinking: *I can roll and fire but the others will be killed, or we can try to bluff it out.* Somehow they talked their way out.

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MIKE MARRIOTT, CBS News

cameraman: I was the cameraman on that last flight up to Danang. Bruce Dunning and Mai Van Duc and I got permission to go along from Ed Daly. When we asked him for permission to go along he said, "Sure, the more the merrier."

When we came in for a landing in Danang the twin runways were perfectly clear and there was not a person near the runways or the taxiways or anything. It seemed contrary to every report we had heard that Danang was about to fall. So we landed.

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EXCERPTED

On the Blue Ridge, the next morning, I saw all the Vietnamese choppers coming in and then ditching in the sea. There were so many of them that they couldn't all land on the deck, so they just hovered around the ship like a swarm of bees. Then they would hover over the water and everybody would jump out and finally the pilot would put the

nose up in the air and he would jump out the door and the chopper would just flop over into the ocean.

All of the embassy people were on the Blue Ridge. And so were the DAO people and the CIA people. They were embarrassed and insulted because they considered that the press lost the war. Even at that time they were saying that we lost the war for America. The CIA station chief, Thomas Polgar, was the most vocal about that. He really disliked us. General Ky was on the Blue Ridge too. He was still cocky. He was so sure of himself that he just sickened us. He was a multimillionaire and one of the most corrupt men going. He got out with his favorites, naturally.

Not long ago I went down to look at the Vietnam Memorial with those 57,000 names on it. I was looking at it and it was so sad because I realized that all of that sacrifice was for absolutely nothing. Nothing. I abhor war. I hate it.

I think that in the end we told the truth about Vietnam as television newsmen. What the military objected to—and I'm not saying that it was all the military, not by any means—was that we brought home to those people who watched the CBS Evening News the real horrors of war and the futility of Vietnam. There were some accusations that newsmen had staged some shots. I don't know about that. But I do know that no matter how you look at it, you've got real napalm victims and real young Americans dying in the arms of a comrade. And that's not staged. That's reality. That's the reality of war. I guess we changed the way America looked at the war. But we didn't do it recklessly or maliciously. We did it because it was there—it was reality. That's how we showed it. □

EXCERPTED**Continued**

CATCHING THE PLANE: One way out was the sturdy DC3s flown by Air Vietnam, the national airline, and by the CIA contract airline Air America. Here a band of refugees boards an Air Vietnam DC3 at Tansonnhut Airport.

